

Mahua Flower through the Ages

What it means to Tribes across India

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Abstract

This comprehensive article delves into the profound significance of the Mahua flower, which serves as the epicentre of life for numerous tribes across India. By unravelling the intricate tapestry of legendary tales intertwined with the Mahua, this discourse explores the seamless integration of these narratives into the rich tapestry of Hindu mythology. The narrative extends beyond folklore to meticulously unravel the multifaceted role played by the Mahua flower, such as production of Mahua liquor, extensive medicinal applications, and so on, in the cultural and socio-economic milieu of tribal communities. Delving into the historical annals, this article meticulously traces the references to the Mahua flower during the British colonial era, shedding light on its enduring presence and relevance through the sands of time. The discourse also navigates through the contemporary landscape, addressing the challenges associated with the collection of the Mahua flower and its continued relevance in the modern era. Furthermore, the article provides a nuanced exploration of governmental initiatives aimed at preserving and promoting the Mahua flower's cultural and economic importance. In essence, this article endeavours to provide a comprehensive and insightful perspective on the multifaceted importance of the Mahua flower, intertwining historical legacies, cultural practices, medicinal applications, contemporary challenges, and governmental initiatives in a tapestry that underscores the intricate interplay between nature and human civilisation.

Keywords: Mahua Flower, Tribes, Culinary, Liquor, Linguistic Diversity, Mahua in History

1.0 Introduction

The indigenous tribes of India, steeped in a tapestry of captivating lives and rich cultural traditions, have perennially beckoned the fascination of urban dwellers who yearn to unravel the intricate nuances of their existence. Through the annals of time, these tribes have ardently clung to their age-old customs, and meticulously passed down the legacy of their unique way of life to successive generations. One such cultural cornerstone that transcends the boundaries of numerous tribes across the diverse landscape of India is the veneration and utilisation of

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the “Mahua”, the tree and its blossoms, a practice ingrained in the very fabric of their daily existence. Embedded deeply within the collective ethos of various tribes, the Mahua tree and its flowers have evolved from mere elements of worship to becoming a linchpin of sustenance for these indigenous communities. This sacred flora has transcended the confines of religious rituals to assume a pivotal role in the daily lives of tribes across different regions of India. At a specific juncture in their historical continuum, the Mahua flower emerged as a critical source of nourishment, captivating the collective imagination of the tribes and intertwining itself with the very essence of their existence. The flower, revered for its multifaceted attributes, holds a preeminent position in the pantheon of tribal practices, especially in the realm of gastronomy. Noteworthy among its applications is the preparation of the famed Mahua liquor, colloquially known as *Ippa Saara* in the Telugu states, a libation that not only encapsulates the essence of tribal conviviality but also serves as a cultural touchstone. Beyond libations, the Mahua flower finds itself enmeshed in the culinary tapestry of tribal life, featuring prominently in the creation of sweets, curries, and other gastronomic delights, particularly during the ebullient celebrations of tribal festivals.

Furthermore, the Mahua tree's by-products are not merely confined to the realm of culinary indulgence; rather, they resonate with a perceived medicinal efficacy and therapeutic resonance within tribal communities. These beliefs, rooted in the ancestral wisdom of the tribes, find validation in contemporary medical research, creating an intriguing confluence of traditional knowledge and scientific scrutiny. In navigating the rich tapestry of the tribes' engagement with the Mahua tree and its blossoms, this exploration endeavours to unveil the layers of significance, from the sacred rituals to the gastronomic delights, and from the cultural festivities to the medicinal ethos. This inquiry extends beyond a mere documentation of customs, seeking to illuminate the profound interplay between the Mahua flower and the intricate mosaic of tribal life in India. It is a holistic understanding of the role of flower and its nature of association with pluralistic culture of the country. The inquiry is therefore based on several sources: academic, journalistic, news items, etc. so that contemporary diverse perspectives are engaged with.

1.2 Geographical Distribution and Habitat of the Mahua Tree

The Mahua tree stands as a testament to the botanical richness that graces the Indian subcontinent. This tropical evergreen species predominantly thrives in the central and eastern plains of India, carving its niche in regions characterised by copious rainfall. While its stronghold is particularly pronounced in the central and eastern expanses, the Mahua tree exhibits a versatile adaptability, asserting its presence in the western part of the country as well. The geographical tapestry of Mahua's prevalence encompasses several states, each bearing witness to the flourishing presence of this botanical marvel. Prominently, the Mahua tree graces the landscapes of Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, eastern Maharashtra, and Gujarat (Behera et al. 2016). This distribution aligns with areas characterised by abundant rainfall, fostering the optimal conditions for the Mahua tree's robust growth. Within these regions, the Mahua tree finds itself deeply intertwined with the cultural practices of various indigenous tribes.

The tribes like Santal, Gond, Munda, and Oraon notably harness the diverse attributes of the Mahua tree for an array of purposes, encapsulating its cultural and utilitarian significance within the fabric of their daily lives. Noteworthy is the indigenous status of the Mahua tree, grounding itself in the soil of India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Myanmar (*see* Sinha et al. 2017). This botanical gem thrives in frost-resistant ecosystems, demonstrating its

adaptability to marginal areas within dry tropical and subtropical forests. Remarkably, the Mahua tree's altitude range spans from 1200 to 1800 meters, further accentuating its resilience and versatility across diverse ecological landscapes (Kureel 2009). In delving into the geographical distribution and habitat of the Mahua tree, this comprehensive overview seeks to paint a vivid portrait of its ecological preferences, cultural entanglements, and the intricate interplay between its indigenous roots and the diverse regions it calls home.

1.3 Situating Mahua in Linguistic Diversity

At the heart of the cultural and botanical tapestry of India lies the scientifically classified *Madhuca Longifolia*, a tree more commonly recognised by the evocative name Mahua. As a botanical entity, Mahua extends its roots deep into the ecological landscape, but its cultural resonance is equally profound, reflected in the plethora of regional names bestowed upon it by the diverse tribes and linguistic communities that dot the Indian subcontinent. *Madhuca Longifolia* or Mahua emerges as a linchpin of biodiversity, weaving itself into the intricate ecological fabric of India. However, its journey through the cultural lexicon reveals a fascinating divergence as it assumes various regional identities across the linguistic mosaic of the nation. In the realm of English nomenclature, the Mahua tree assumes the poetic epithets of the "honey tree" or the "butter tree," capturing the essence of its contributions to the culinary and gastronomic heritage of the regions it inhabits. However, it is in the diverse linguistic nuances of the Indian subcontinent that Mahua truly comes alive, donning an array of identities reflective of the rich cultural diversity it is entwined with. In the southern regions of India, specifically in Telugu, the Mahua tree is affectionately referred to as "vipa," while in Tamil it assumes the moniker of "iluppai," each name a testament to the linguistic richness that permeates the subcontinent.

Travelling eastward, the Santali community bestows upon it the name "matkom," underscoring the regional nuances that colour the linguistic canvas of the Mahua tree. Venturing into the eastern territories, the Bengali-speaking populace fondly embraces Mahua as "mohua," while in Odia, it echoes through the landscape as "mahula." Further west, in the Marathi-speaking regions, it adopts the simple yet resonant name of "Mahu," epitomising the linguistic diversity that characterizes India's cultural terrain. In Malayalam, it is known as "poonam" or "ilupa" while in Gujarat it is called "mahuda". Finally, in the arid landscapes of Rajasthan, the Mahua tree takes on the names "dolma" in Mevadi and Marwari, reflecting the adaptability of its identity across diverse linguistic and cultural landscapes. (Trifed nd.; and Sahu et al. 2022). This linguistic exploration not only serves as a testament to the profound interweaving of nature and culture but also underscores the linguistic richness embedded in the cultural fabric of India. The Mahua tree, with its myriad names, emerges not merely as a botanical entity but as a living testament to the linguistic diversity that defines the cultural kaleidoscope of the Indian subcontinent. No doubt, this diversity unravels the layers of meaning encapsulated in the various names bestowed upon the Mahua tree, providing a nuanced understanding of its cultural significance across the linguistic and tribal landscape of India.

1.4 Legend of Mahua: A Cross-cultural presentation

The tree of Mahua is the *Kalpa Vriksha* or Wish Granting Tree for the tribals as it is associated with every part of their life. There are many legendary tales associated with its flower. One of the most famous ones, which the author has also heard from childhood, is associated with Lord Shiva / Pashupati. (Indigo Arts Gallery 2023). One day lord Shiva was

meditating under a Mahua tree and felt thirsty, he looked around everywhere for water but couldn't find it anywhere nearby. He looked into the hollow of the Mahua tree under which he was meditating and found water in it. He instantly drank a handful. A feeling of well-being passed through him and he started feeling Euphoric. He drank a little more and started feeling light headed. He did not realise that the water contained fallen flowers of Mahua which over a period of time had fermented, thereby making the water intoxicating and sweet with its fragrance. Lord Shiva now became very talkative like a parrot. He gave in to his resistance and drank some more of it; he lost all his senses and started dancing like a child. This story passed on from many generations in the tribal community and the tribals thus considered this tree, flower and its drink to be divine and gave it a deity-status (ibid.).

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Another legend of the Mahua Tree (personified) is associated with Sri Neelakandeshwar Temple in Nagapattinam District of Tamil Nadu. (see Ralleigh 2018). The story goes like this, Lord Shiva ordered the Mahua tree to grow at a particular place in the temple of Sri Neelakandeshwar, and the tree followed the order. Lord Shiva became happy on following the orders and granted the tree two wishes. According to which, the oil of the tree would be used in lighting the lamps of the temple, and the tree would be the most popular tree in the area. The contemporary relevance of this legend seems to be true, as this thousand year old temple is surrounded with Mahua trees and the oil of Mahua is still used to light lamps in the temple. The entire area around the temple is so densely packed with the trees of Mahua that the village was named after it, i.e. *Illupaipattu* or the land of the Mahua (ibid.).

1.5 Historical References

Apart from mythological stories revolving around the Mahua tree, there are many historical references that mentioned this tree with archaeological evidences. It begins from the Vedic age where Mahua is mentioned in the Atharvana Veda (Sinha et al.2017). It is identified with an equivalent name of *Madhuka* in Sanskrit Language, where it was supposedly used in love-spells and also as an intoxicating drink. The *Charaka Samhita* also mentions this flower for its curative properties. This tree also finds mention in the "Baburnama" written by Babur, the founder of Mughal Empire (Chatterjee 2022). During the British era, a Christian-missionary named James Merry MacPhail (1922) also mentions about the utility of Mahua flowers.

In her essay titled "Famine in Bengal: A Comparison of the 1770 Famine in Bengal and the 1897 Famine in Chotanagpur", historian Vinita Damodaran (2007) mentions that Mahua was not only used as a food source but also became a significant part of the diet of the poor for several months of the year. During periods of droughts, famines, and epidemics under colonial rule, Mahua was a lifeline for thousands of people, as it saved them from starvation. Sir Charles Watt, a Scottish botanist, quotes a former magistrate and collector of Monghyr (now Munger), Mr. Lockwood, who says that the abundant Mahua crop kept thousands of poor people from starving during a scarcity period in Bihar in the year 1873-74. (Watt 1889:413). The folk songs of Chhattishgarh also narrate the contribution of Mahua followers at the time of scarcity (Elwin 1946:165-166).

Mahua has been an integral part of festivities and celebrations for many communities, whether consumed as a food or liquor, as it represents both abundance and resilience. The Tamil proverb, *Alaaiillaathaoorililuppai poo sarkarai*, literary means that in "the place where there is no sugar factory, Iluppai (Mahua flowers in Tamil) is the sugar," speaks to the significance of Mahua as a sweetener. The high sugar content of Mahua (Jayasree et al. 1998) has made it a popular ingredient in the preparation of festive sweets and treats. A folksong of

tribes inhabiting central Indian forests captures this sentiment, stating "Give my husband a leaf-cup of Mahua spirit, but for my lover make the Mahua into little sweets" (cited in Chatterjee 2022).

1.5.1 Colonial Regulations

Mahua was a free gift of nature. But the colonial government enacted two laws to establish a European trade in Mahua, mainly as a source of spirits of wine and for the purpose of feeding cattle. In this context, Watt writes, "With a view to regulating the trade in Mahua spirit the Bombay Government have passed certain legislative measure which have had the effect of having a State monopoly of the purchase of the flowers" (Watt 1889:414). The two laws are discussed in brief.

1.5.1.1 The Bombay Abkari Act of 1878

The first law enacted by the British Indian government in Bombay (now Mumbai) that regulated the production, sale, and consumption of alcohol in the region was the Bombay Abkari Act, 1878. (*see* Saldanha 1995 and Anon.1898). It was one of the earliest laws in India to regulate the alcohol industry and came into force on 1st September 1878. Under this Act, licenses were issued to individuals and companies for the production, sale, and distribution of alcohol. It also regulated the transport and storage of alcohol, imposed taxes and duties, and provided for the prevention of illicit trafficking and sale of liquor. The act imposed restrictions on the sale of alcohol to minors and intoxicated individuals, and mandated the display of warning signs at liquor establishments. It also imposed penalties for violations of the act, including fines and imprisonment.

1.5.1.2 Mhowra Act of 1892

Many spirit-regulation acts came into force during the British era and the most important act among them was the Mhowra Act of 1892 (*see* Saldanha 1995 and Anon.1898). It was during the regime of Viceroy Lord Lansdowne, this act was enacted. According to this act, the production of Mahua based liquor was prohibited by the government along with collection of Mahua flowers. The British considered the Mahua drink as vile and only meant for barbarians; citing that is a highly dangerous intoxicant and not meant for human consumption, they banned it under the grounds of threat to public health and morality. Indian historians debate that the British wanted to secure the rich alcohol markets in India which were hitherto being dominated by local drinks. They wanted to replace them with their branded Scotch-whisky which was not famous at that point. In spite of these restrictions the tribals clandestinely collected the Mahua flowers and started brewing the liquor in small quantities. But to hide it from the government it was often infused with impurities being added as filler. The result was the decline of the quality of Mahua liquor which actually furthered the British government's agenda. People slowly stopped buying from the tribals and started buying imported liquor from the market. This led to the loss of livelihood of the tribals and the tribals eventually turned to domestic labour (*ibid.*).

1.6 Importance of Mahua flower

Mahua is a multipurpose tree; it supplies a range of foods, medicines and other commodities. Its economic importance is tremendous in tribal communities. It has the pharmacological potency of treating several diseases like tuberculosis, rheumatoid arthritis, cholera, paralysis,

snake-bite, debility, tonsillitis, influenza, piles, arthritic pain, helminthiasis, headache, flatulency, and infections, besides being used as a blood purifier and as an antidote to poison (Nayak et al.2023 and also *see* Behera et al. 2016). The uses of mahua are briefly summarised as follows:

1. Most famously known for the intoxicating drink, Mahua flowers are used to make two alcoholic drinks, they are *Mahua Daarua* and *Mahul*, using the process of fermentation (Kumari et al.2016).
2. Mahua flowers are used as a sweetener in dishes like *halwa* due to presence of sugars in it (Patel et al. 2011).
3. Rice cakes are made from Mahua flowers during festivals.
4. To increase milk production, spent flowers are fed to cattle.
5. The concentrated flower juice is used as a tonic, an Anti-Itch cream (for skin disease), to arrest bleeding, and to cure headache.
6. The flower powder is used to cure diarrhoea.
7. Eating the raw flowers help increase milk production in lactating women.
8. The flower mixed with milk in a particular ratio helps curing impotency.
9. The flower dried in ghee helps relieve piles (*see* Dwivedi et al. 2022, Pinakin 2018, and Sinha et al. 2017 for details).

1.7 Contemporary relevance of Mahua Liquor

In 2020, the government of India recognised the importance of Mahua liquor and its rich historical culture. The government launched Mahua liquor as the “Mahua Nutri-beverage” under the Ministry of Tribal Welfare. The Beverage was bottled and sold in six fruit-based flavours and was available at the price of ₹700 for a 750ml bottle. It was developed by the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Delhi in collaboration with the Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India (TRIFED). This legalisation of Mahua liquor and encouragement of it by the government actually became beneficial for the tribals as they can now legally manufacture Mahua liquor and sell it (Trifed 2023).

Apart from this, many chefs of India are experimenting in the field of culinary-alchemy where urban-dwellers are developing a taste for tribal dishes due to their nutritional and medicinal values. There are various YouTube channels focused on rural cooking that showcase Mahua-based recipes which go beyond the functional preparations of an earlier era. These recipes include deep-fried *puris* made with sweetened wheat dough and stuffed with cooked *chana dal* and pureed Mahua, as well as Mahua flour (powder) cooked with lentils or milk on low heat. Other recipes feature spongy fritters made with fresh Mahua juice and wheat flour, or flatbreads made with a paste of soaked, sun-dried Mahua and millet or wheat flour that is sometimes fried in mustard oil on a griddle (Chatterjee 2021).

1.8 Conclusion

With the initiatives of media and the internet, many such customs and traditions which were almost wiped off due to urbanisation, are springing back to life. It is the duty of the government to protect and preserve such tribal culture, which would not only make India unique but also help in economic development. Apart from that, Mahua flowers are a rich source of wholesome nutrition and can be utilised as a food by civilians too. In the age of processed foods and drinks, edibles made from Mahua can prove to be not just healthy but also a great source of income.

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